



United States Department of Agriculture
Forest Service

Aurora Rose Mining Environmental Assessment

Beckwourth Ranger District, Plumas National Forest, Plumas County, California
April, 2019



Rose Quartz Outcrop on Aurora Rose Claim

Photo by Donna Duncan, 2011

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Background

Dennis Holcomb, claim owner and operator, has submitted a Plan of Operations for the Aurora Rose Mining operation. He is proposing to operate through September 20, 2024. The operating period would begin when the Plan of Operations is signed by the authorizing official. This environmental assessment is conducted in an effort to identify resource concerns and alternatives associated with implementation of this Plan. Any mitigations to address resource concerns identified through this process can be incorporated into the Forest Service response to the proposal and attached to the Plan of Operations.

Introduction

The Plumas National Forest proposes to approve a Plan of Operations for exploratory mining activity which includes use of hand tools, hand drills, some maintenance of the access route, removal of a few small trees, and long term occupancy. The project area is northwest of the valley formerly called Squaw Valley, and is within the Beckwourth Ranger District, Plumas National Forest, California. This action is needed in response to a Plan of Operations submitted by the claim owner under the General Mining Law of 1872 and in accordance with 36 CFR 228.

The proposed action follows the operator's submitted Plan of Operations. An additional alternative looks at the Plan of Operations with mitigations developed through environmental review.

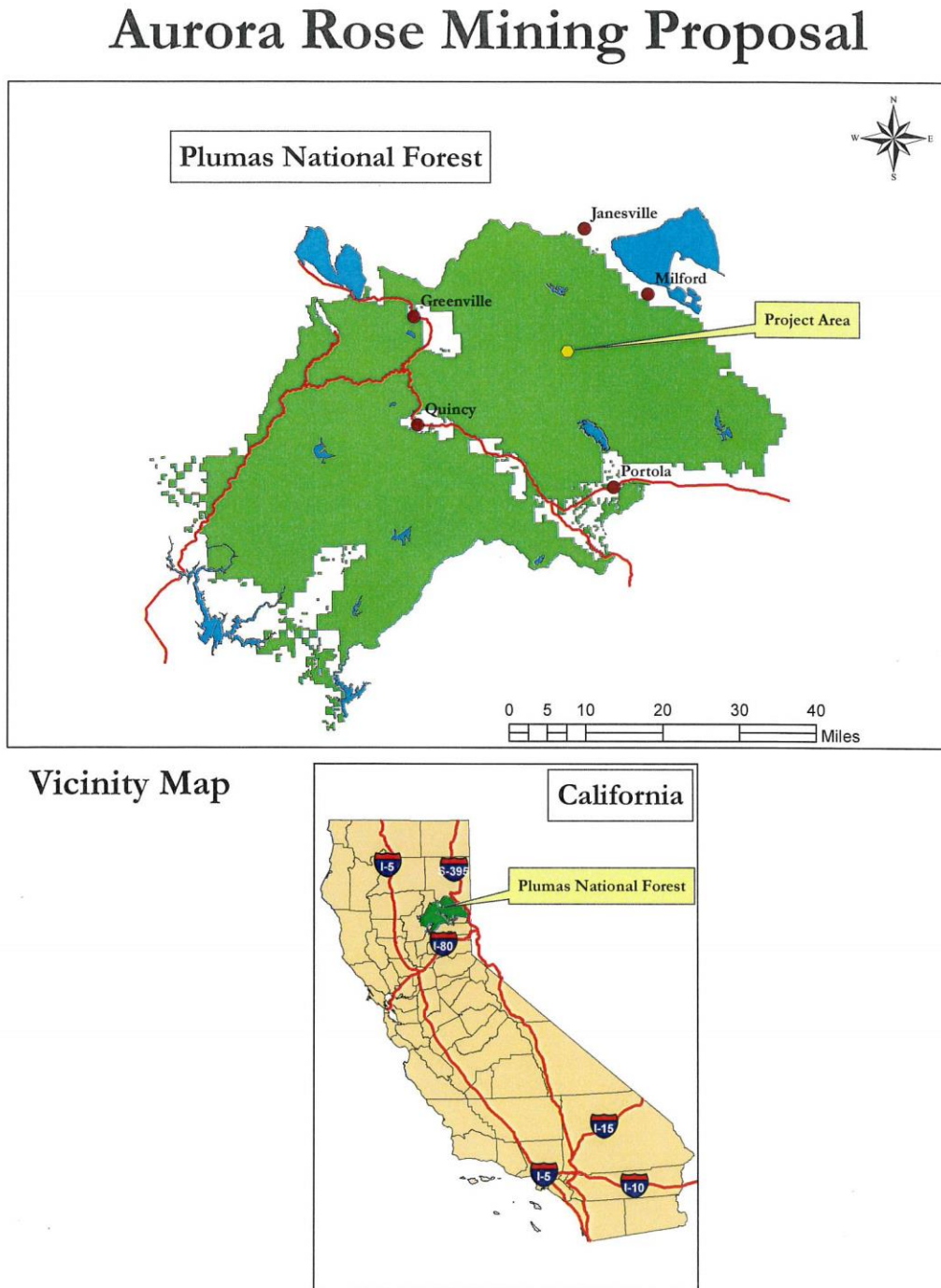
The responsible official will decide whether to approve the proposal as submitted, approve with recommended mitigations, or deny operations as proposed. The Forest Service cannot deny a locatable mineral Plan of Operations where the proposed activities are reasonably incident to mining and will comply with other Federal laws.

We prepared this environmental assessment (EA) to determine whether implementation of exploratory mining activities may significantly affect the quality of the human environment and thereby require the preparation of an environmental impact statement. By preparing this EA, we are fulfilling agency policy and direction to comply with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). For more details of the proposed action, see the Proposed Action and Alternatives section of this document.

Proposed Project Location

The project area is located southeast of Babcock Peak, off National Forest System Road 26N53. The legal description is T26N, R12E, Section 36, MDBM. Access is through the valley formerly called Squaw Valley, along Road 28N01 to Road 26N08, to 26N53, then along OHV Route 12M13.

Figure 1. Vicinity map



Need for the Proposal

An individual seeks to discover the mineral potential of his claim which is located on National Forest System lands. He has submitted a Plan of Operations to obtain authorization for the surface disturbance associated with the exploration methods he will use to extract the locatable minerals. (Locatable minerals are minerals of value such as gold, silver, copper and gemstones.) His Plan of Operations is needed to authorize: use of hand tools, hand drills, intermittent, long term camping (longer than allowed by Forest Order), use of waste rock and overburden to fill in holes along OHV route 12M13, clearing brush along the access road and possible removal a few trees at the outcropping, if needed to access the minerals.

This Environmental Assessment is needed because this Plan of Operations has been submitted requesting authorization for exploration of a locatable minerals claim. According to Code of Federal Regulations 36 CFR 228; Subpart A, the Forest must provide a timely response to a proposed Plan of Operations. In order to provide a response and provide reasonable changes, modifications and/or mitigations to the submitted proposal, we evaluate the proposal through an Environmental Assessment.

According to the 1988 Plumas National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan, as amended, the Forest Service must encourage mineral exploration and development that reasonably protects surface resources and provides for land reclamation. The purpose of this specific analysis is to determine if the proposed Plan of Operations can be approved as submitted, can be approved with accompanying design features and mitigations required to protect surface resources, or if the Plan cannot be approved at all because it is contrary to law or regulation.

Decision Framework

The Beckwourth District Ranger of the Plumas National Forest, as the Responsible Official, will decide whether to implement the claimant's proposed Aurora Rose Mining Plan of Operations (Alternative 1: the Proposed Action) or implement an alternative to the proposed action.

The ensuing Decision Notice (DN) linked to this Environmental Assessment (EA) does not directly result in the approval of the claimants' Plan of Operations (PoO). Rather, the DN fulfills legal requirements and provides rationale for selecting reasonable resource protection mitigations, administered as Conditions of Approval (COAs). The approval of the Aurora Rose Mining PoO would be authorized in a subsequent written decision letter, contingent upon the claimant's willingness to comply with the requirements of the Agency's decision including reasonable protection of surface natural resources, posting of a bond, and acquisition of required permit(s) in compliance with other Federal, State and Local regulations.

Public Involvement and Tribal Consultation

The proposal was listed in the Schedule of Proposed Actions from September 2018 to the present time. A notice was published in the Portola Reporter on October 17, 2018, of an opportunity to comment on the Aurora Rose Mining proposal. In addition, as part of the public involvement process, the Forest Service notified local tribes.

The Forest Service consulted the following individuals, Federal, State, tribal, and local agencies during the development of this EA: Maidu Summit Consortium, Susanville Indian Rancheria, Washoe Tribe of Nevada and California, and the Greenville Indian Rancheria.

Proposed Action and Alternatives

The proposed action and one alternative were considered:

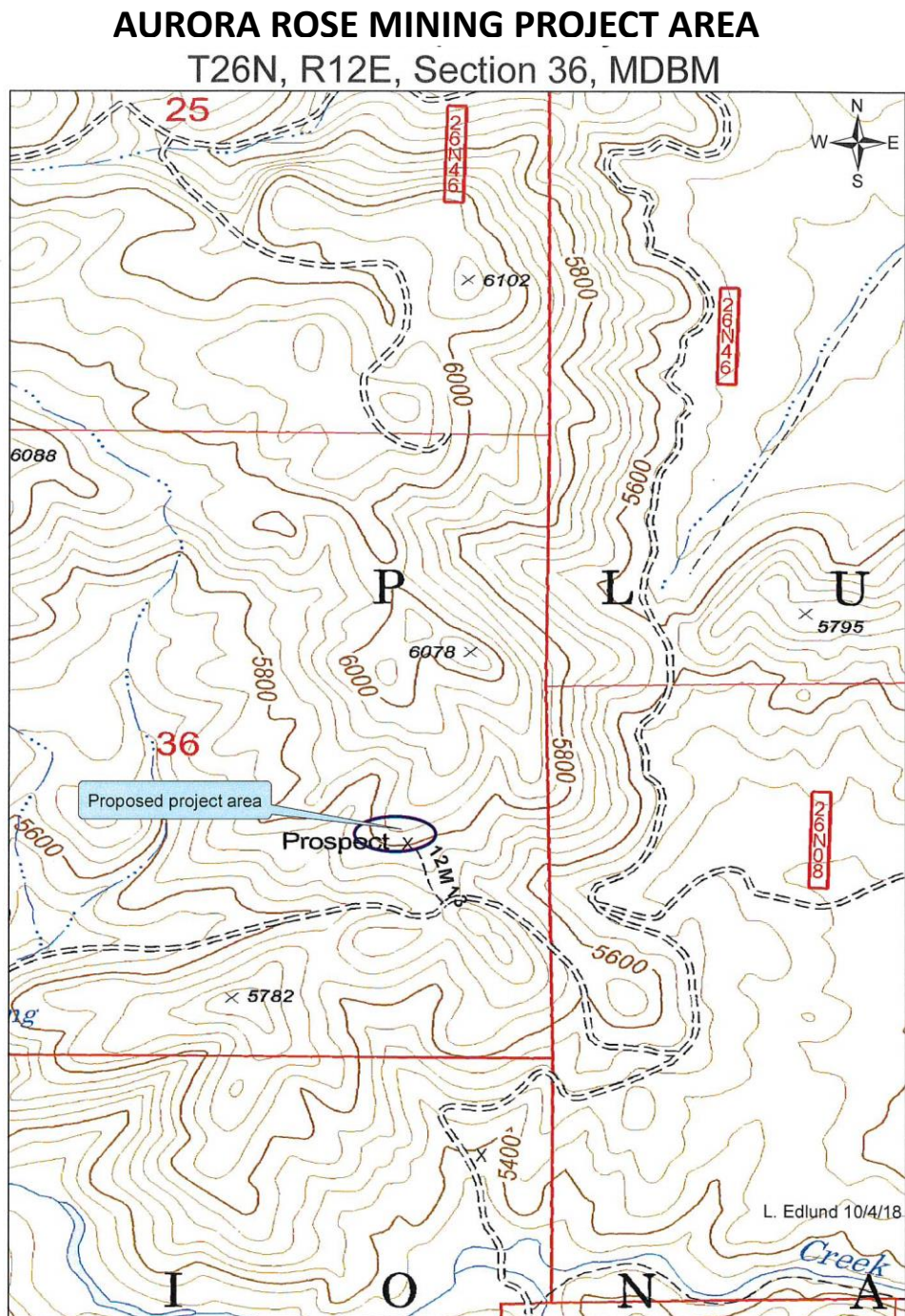
Alternative A – Plan as submitted

Proposed Action

The proposed action represents the Plan of Operations for the Aurora Rose Mining Project, as submitted by Mr. Dennis Holcomb. The Plan as submitted would authorize excavation of a mineralized vein on the Aurora Rose mining claim. All work would be completed with hand tools including shovels, picks, and hand operated drills. A few small trees (8 inch diameter or less) may be removed to allow access to mineralized areas. Access to the site is along a 4WD route. The operator has proposed maintaining this road by filling in holes with loose tailings material from the mine. Some brush would also be removed along the sides of the road. The operator plans on working 40-60 hours per week at the site during the summer months and has proposed camping on the claim during operational periods.

The timeframe for the proposed operations is through September 30, 2024. Seasonal operations would occur between May and October depending upon weather conditions. Reclamation would include removing all camping and mining equipment, restoration of excavated sites, and erosion control measures. All operations under this plan would be concluded by September 30 of 2024. Annual inspections and re-evaluations of the operation will occur to determine if final reclamation can be completed prior to the 2024 date.

Figure 2. Project Map



Alternative B - Plan with Forest Service mitigations

Alternative B is the proposed Plan of Operations with mitigations provided by Forest Service resource specialists and other agency consultants. Alternative B seeks to identify resource concerns related to hydrological, biological and historical processes and address them through modifications to the original Plan. Alternative B outlines additional parameters for mining as well as reclamation activities.

MITIGATIONS

Soil and Hydrological Resources:

USDA National Best Management Practices (BMPs) will be incorporated into the Conditions of Approval. These would include:

- **Min-2 Minerals Exploration** as it pertains to rehabilitation, reclamation, the transportation spill response plan, and the use of other applicable BMPs (e.g. Fac-5, etc.) and
- **Min-8 Minerals Site Reclamation** as it pertains to rehabilitation of disturbed areas, including exploratory trenches, pits, and holes to the original contour; the reconstruction, maintenance, or decommissioning of roads, trails, and staging areas; AND establishment of effective ground cover on disturbed sites as needed.

There are no stream channels that are expected to be impacted by the proposed activities.

Botanical Resources:

The following noxious weed precautions will be applied.

Standard management requirements (SMRs) were developed in accordance with the direction set forth in FSM 2900, as well as the standards and guidelines in Appendix A of the ROD for SNFPA:

Prevention

1. Require all off-road equipment and vehicles (Forest Service and contracted) used for project implementation to be weed-free. Clean all equipment and vehicles of all attached mud, dirt and plant parts at a vehicle washing station or steam cleaning facility before the equipment and vehicles enter the project area. Cleaning is not required for vehicles that would stay on the roadway. In addition, clean all off-road equipment prior to leaving areas infested with noxious weeds.
2. Make every effort to ensure that all materials (i.e. gravel, fill, mulches, etc.) used on the NFS are free of invasive species and/or noxious weeds. Use onsite sand, gravel, rock or organic matter where possible. Encourage use of certified weed free hay and straw. Where states have legislative authority to certify materials as weed-free (or invasive free) and have an active State program to make those State-certified materials available to the public, rules shall be developed that restrict the possession, use, and transport of those materials unless proof exists that they have been State certified.

Control

3. Early Detection and Rapid Response (EDRR): Inventory and survey so as to quickly detect invasive species infestations, and subsequently implement immediate and specific actions to eradicate those infestations before they become established and/or spread. Coordinate detection

and response with internal and external partners. EDRR actions are grouped into three main categories: early detection, rapid assessment, and rapid response.

Restoration/Revegetation

4. Pro-actively manage aquatic and terrestrial areas of the NFS to increase the ability of those areas to be self-sustaining and resistant (resilience) to the establishment of invasive species. Where necessary, implement restoration, rehabilitation, and/or revegetation activities following invasive species treatments to prevent or reduce the likelihood of the reoccurrence or spread of invasive species.

5. Where restoration, rehabilitation, or revegetation activities are planned, use weed-free equipment, mulches, and seed sources. Avoid seeding in areas where revegetation will occur naturally, unless noxious weeds are a concern. Save topsoil from disturbance and put it back to use in onsite revegetation, unless contaminated with noxious weeds. All activities that require seeding or planting will need to use only locally collected native seed sources. Plant and seed material should be collected from as close to the project area as possible, from within the same watershed and at a similar elevation whenever possible. Persistent non-natives such as timothy, orchard- grass, or ryegrass will be avoided. This will implement the USFS Region 5 policy that directs the use of native plant material for revegetation and restoration for maintaining “the overall national goal of conserving the biodiversity, health, productivity, and sustainable use of forest, rangeland, and aquatic ecosystems”.

Wildlife Resources:

To preserve and protect wildlife habitat, the following will be required:

- Retain all snags 15” or greater, except for those posing a safety hazard.
- Any open pit, or drilling hole large enough for any small mammal to fit in, that is not immediately filled in after exploration, needs to be covered securely enough so as not to allow any wildlife in the area to fall into it and become trapped.
- No Riparian Conservation Area buffers are required.
- When camping for an extended period of time, all human food and refuse must be stored in a bear proof container to avoid wildlife access.

While Limited Operating Periods (LOP) are not necessary at this time, the proposed activity is being authorized for 6 years, and wildlife species of concern could move into the area. Therefore, the following mitigation measures would need to be implemented:

- If wolves settle within 1 miles of the mine site during any of the 6 years that the claimant is planning on working the mine, formal consultation with US Fish and Wildlife Service would need to be initiated.
- If a goshawk or spotted owl nest, or fisher den site should be discovered within a quarter mile of the mine site, a Limited Operating Period (LOPs) would be required.
 1. Spotted owl: March 1 through August 15
 2. Goshawk: Feb 15 through September 15
 3. Fisher: March 1 through June 30

Heritage Resources:

If any evidence of articles of cultural significance are found while the mining operation is in progress, all activities will cease until the area can be assessed and mitigations can be implemented.

Minerals Administration Evaluation of Proposed Operation:

- Regular inspections of the site would be implemented to ensure that mining activities fall within the scope of the Plan of Operations and Conditions of Approval and to ensure that reclamation is being performed in a timely manner.
- A bond which covers the potential costs of reclamation or equipment removal will be in place prior to the start of operations.
- A fire prevention plan will be included in the Conditions of Approval outlining the operator's responsibilities to prevent fires and procedures if a fire should occur.
- A fuel spill prevention plan will be included in the Conditions of Approval to ensure that hazardous materials are properly stored, handled and disposed of.
- Approved port-a-potties shall be used for human waste. These must be emptied only at facilities off forest that provide that service.
- A reclamation plan which outlines restoration of the mining pit and access roads will be included in the Conditions of Approval. All equipment and personal items will be removed from the site. Reclamation will be inspected by Plumas National Forest staff to ensure completeness.

Compliance with State and Local Agency Regulations

- This operation falls under the thresholds specified by the Surface Mining and Reclamation Act of 1975 (SMARA).

Environmental Impacts of the Proposed Action and Alternatives

This section summarizes the potential impacts of the proposed action and alternatives for each impacted resource. Resources that would not be impacted and therefore not further analyzed include: timber, silviculture, fuels, and engineering.

Proposed Action (Alternative A)

Water Quality and Soils:

Ground-disturbing activities associated with the proposed actions stated in the Aurora Rose Plan of Operations can potentially result in affects to the resources of Hydrology and Soils. **Erosion from the exploration site and roads can increase the sediment load in water runoff.**

Botanical Resources:

Surface disturbing activities create a risk of introduction of invasive species in the project area.

Wildlife:

Direct and Indirect Effects

Due to the limited scope of the mining operations, direct effects are expected to be minimal. The only foreseen direct effect would be human disturbance in the immediate vicinity of the mine from the long term camping and use of a generator. Indirect effects could be attracting wildlife to the site, especially bears, from the smell of human food and garbage.

The mine site is not within a Critical Aquatic Refuge area.

Cumulative Effects

Direct and indirect effects should be minimal; therefore cumulative effects are not expected.

Heritage Resources:

There is one historical property located in the project area, a historic railroad grade. This feature is currently overlapped by the National Forest System (NFS) road and will not be affected by the proposed mining activities.

Alternative B - Plan with Forest Service mitigations

Water Quality and Soils:

Ground-disturbing activities associated with the proposed actions stated in the Aurora Rose Plan of Operations can potentially result in affects to the resources of Hydrology and Soils. By effectively planning and mitigating for erosion control, sedimentation and water quality can be controlled or prevented. Appropriate erosion control methods and the protection of water quality will be achieved through the successful implementation of **BMPs**.

Botanical Resources:

Surface disturbing activities create a risk of introduction of invasive species in the project area. Implementation of the mitigations included in Alternative B would reduce that risk.

Wildlife:

Limiting the use of generators and using bear proof containers will minimize the impacts to wildlife. Direct and indirect effects should be minimal; therefore cumulative effects are not expected.

Heritage Resources:

There is one historical property located in the project area, a historic railroad grade. This feature is currently overlapped by the NFS road and will not be affected by the proposed mining activities.

If any evidence of articles of cultural significance are found while the mining operation is in progress, all activities will cease until the area can be assessed and mitigations can be implemented.

Finding of No Significant Impact

As the responsible official, I am responsible for evaluating the effects of the project relative to the definition of significance established by the CEQ Regulations (40 CFR 1508.13). I have reviewed and considered the EA and documentation included in the project record, and I have determined that the Aurora Rose Mining project proposed action and alternative will not have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment. As a result, no environmental impact statement will be prepared. My rationale for this finding is as follows, organized by sub-section of the CEQ definition of significance referenced above.

Context

For the proposed action and alternatives the context of the environmental effects is based on the environmental analysis in this EA. The area under this analysis comprises less than 1 acre of land, removal of less than 1000 cubic yards of material using hand tools and long term occupancy in a tent or pickup truck. Some minor road repairs would be accomplished using hand tools. The mining operation would continue over the next five years.

Intensity

Intensity is a measure of the severity, extent, or quantity of effects, and is based on information from the effects analysis of this EA and the references in the project record. The effects of this project have been appropriately and thoroughly considered with an analysis that is responsive to concerns and issues raised by the public. The agency has taken a hard look at the environmental effects using relevant scientific information and knowledge of site-specific conditions gained from field visits. My finding of no significant impact is based on the context of the project and intensity of effects using the ten factors identified in 40 CFR 1508.27(b).

1. Impacts that may be both beneficial and adverse. A significant effect may exist even if the Federal agency believes that, on balance, the effect will be beneficial.

Consideration of the intensity of environmental effects is not biased by any potential beneficial effects of the action.

The Forest Service proposes to benefit the development of mineral resources by authorizing this plan for 5 years. Temporary adverse effects during implementation may include soil disturbance, continued use of a non-system road. These temporary adverse effects will be mitigated to reduce disturbance to minimal levels.

2. The degree to which the proposed action affects public health or safety.

There will be no significant effect to human health or safety for the following reasons: Campfires would require a permit and would not be allowed during times of high fire danger (fire restrictions).

The area is remote and doesn't get a lot of public use.

Inspections of the operation will be done regularly to identify and correct any safety issues or potential issues.

3. Unique characteristics of the geographic area such as the proximity to historical or cultural resources, parklands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas.

There will be no significant effects to unique characteristics of the area. Removal of material in the exploration process will somewhat change the character of the quartz outcropping. However, by using hand tools only, a minimal amount of disturbance is expected.

4. The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial.

The effects on the quality of the human environment are not likely to be highly controversial. There is no known scientific controversy over the impacts of the proposed action.

Note: The term “controversial” in this context refers to cases where substantial scientific dispute exists as to the size, nature, or effects of a major Federal action on some human environmental factor, rather than to public opposition of a proposed action or alternative.

5. The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.

The agency has considerable experience with actions like the one proposed (36 CFR 228.5). The analysis shows the effects are not uncertain, and do not involve unique or unknown risk.

6. The degree to which the action may establish precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration.

The action is not likely to establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects, because it affects a specific project area and routinely addresses a common agency action.

7. Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts.

The cumulative impacts are not significant. The effects of the action are limited to the local area and there are no other effects that would be additive to the effects of the proposed action.

8. The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources.

There will be no effect to any historical or cultural resources.

9. The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act of 1973.

The action will not adversely affect any endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act of 1973 because no threatened or endangered species have been identified within the project area. If, during the implementation of this project, evidence of an endangered or threatened species is determined, a qualified biologist will be called immediately to make a species determination in relation to project implementation and mitigations required.

10. Whether the action threatens a violation of Federal, State, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.

The action would not violate Federal, State, and local laws or requirements for the protection of the environment. Applicable laws and regulations pertaining to the project were considered in the EA. The action is consistent with the 1988 Plumas National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan, as amended by the 2004 Sierra Nevada Forests Plan Amendment (SNFPA) final supplemental EIS and Record of Decision.

After considering the effects of the actions analyzed, in terms of context and intensity, I have determined that these actions will not have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment. Therefore, an environmental impact statement will not be prepared.

Contact

For additional information regarding this project, please contact Donna Duncan or Leslie Edlund at the Mt. Hough Ranger District office at (530) 283-0555.